



UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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Centre for Human Rights
Faculty of Law

PRESS STATEMENT

CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS CALLS ON SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT TO INSIST ON PEACE THAT DOES NOT CONDONE RUSSIA'S ILLEGAL CONDUCT

25 April 2025

The Centre for Human Rights, Faculty of Law, University of Pretoria (Centre), expresses its disappointment that the visit by Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, on 24 April 2025 to South Africa had to be cut short due to an attack on the Ukrainian capital city killing at least 9 nine civilians.

The circumstances necessitating the shortening of the visit underlines the illegality of the Russian invasion of and relentless attacks on Ukrainian civilians.

The only possible justification under international law for the use of force, in the way Russia has done, is self-defense. However, no case has been or can conceivably be made out that Russia was acting in self-defense in the attack on Kiev today. The argument that looming NATO membership provided a justification for Russian aggression flies in the face of the requirement under international law that only an imminent attack may justify the use of force in self-defense.

The rules of international humanitarian law regulate state conduct during war. The rules in respect of international armed conflicts have been codified in the 1977 Protocol I Additional to the 1949 Geneva Conventions, relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflict.

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This Protocol makes it very clear that warring parties must distinguish between the civilian population and combatants; and that they are allowed to direct operations 'only against military objectives' (article 48). Both the Russian Federation and Ukraine have accepted Protocol I as binding on them.

The attack on Kiev, which is devoid of a military objective, is a flagrant violation of this foundational principle of international humanitarian law. In addition, it amounts to a gross violation of international human rights law.

The Centre commends South Africa for its role in upholding the tenets of international human rights and humanitarian law, poignantly illustrated in the submission of the case before the International Court of Justice against Israel, alleging that it has committed genocide in its attacks on the civilian population of Gaza.

The Centre calls on the South African government to condemn this most recent attack by the Russian Federation; and to take all the measures in its power to bring the parties to an equitable and lasting peace, based on international law. As a proponent of the multilateral international legal order, South Africa should add its voice to those insisting that the consequences of Russia's illegal actions should not be condoned as part of a peace agreement.

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